

Beauty and the Beast: A Conversation with Sir Harrison Birtwistle

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DAVID BEARD

Beauty and the beast: a conversation with Sir Harrison Birtwistle

SIR HARRISON BIRTWISTLE's new opera *The minotaur*, which will be premiered at Covent Garden on 15 April 2008, explores a familiar narrative from Greek mythology, the historical origins of which can be summarised as follows. When King Minos besieged Athens, Neptune sent a bull to Crete, which caught the attention of Minos's wife, Pasiphae. Having made love to the bull, Pasiphae gave birth to the Minotaur, half man, half bull. On his return, shamed by the visible proof of his wife's infidelity, King Minos shut the Minotaur away inside a specially designed labyrinth. As retribution for the death of his son during the siege, Minos demanded that seven men and seven women be sent from Athens each year to be sacrificed to the Minotaur.

Divided into two acts, *The minotaur* spans 13 scenes and three instrumental sections. The opera opens on the coast of Crete where Ariadne, King Minos's daughter and half-sister to the Minotaur, paces a moon-drenched beach. A ship approaches, bringing its annual cargo of Innocents to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. Ariadne has seen this tragedy played out many times before and the ritual chills her; the sea's waves are her 'locks and chains, a door that slams and slams'. But aboard the ship is Theseus, the son of King Aegeus of Athens. When Theseus comes ashore, Ariadne recognises in him someone who is fearless enough to challenge the Minotaur, someone who may set her free.

The action moves in and out of the labyrinth. Each time we return to it, we discover a little more about the Minotaur, who is described by the opera's librettist, David Harsent, as the 'half-and-half, the neither/nor'. When he stirs, 'heat in my balls, murder in my eye', crowds goad the Minotaur to hunt, rape and murder the Innocents. The Keres, mythical vulture-like creatures, devour what remains. But in his dreams (scenes 6 and 9) the Minotaur laments his situation. Subsequently, Ariadne consults an Oracle where she must answer a question truthfully. She then tells Theseus of her plan to save his life by giving him a sword to kill the Minotaur and a ball of string to find his way back. When, in scene 12, Theseus finally enters the labyrinth, he slays the Minotaur. But in his dying words the Minotaur speaks of his realisation that the human and the animal are indivisible in everyone, that 'Between man and beast' there is 'Next to nothing'.

Ariadne will be sung by Christine Rice, the Minotaur by John Tomlinson,

and Theseus by Johan Reuter.

The following conversation took place at the composer's home in Mere, Wiltshire, on 4 August 2007.

David Beard How do you see the atmosphere of *The minotaur*?

Harrison Birtwistle Dark. It's a very terrible place.

DB But it has some darkly lyrical moments, especially in Ariadne's part. I don't think you've written such a prominent role for a female character before.

HB No, that just came out of it. In some senses it's her opera.

DB Do you see her as the main character?

HB Well, the main character is what the opera is about. And these characters just serve something that is central to an idea, which is bigger than them, which is what happens in Greek tragedy too, isn't it? But then you have to face up to the reality that there are so many contradictions in something like an island with this terrible, terrible place. And where is it, you know? And what does she do? I mean, what is she doing there? Who does her hair? Does she go to a café, or something? So they're archetypes, you don't have to answer those questions. This is fascinating...

DB Do you see Ariadne as a captive of that island?

HB Yes, I mean she's in a terrible predicament. She's frustrated in every sense. She wants off.

DB Theseus is her ticket out, potentially.

HB You're right, that's exactly what he is.

DB And the Minotaur?

HB He's got a terrible predicament. He's like the animal that is hunted. Animals don't ask to be hunted, they hunt. It's all about these people getting out of this predicament: Theseus wants the Minotaur killed, Ariadne wants off; she wants out of it.

DB But there's a human side to the Minotaur that you also show us, the side

of him that Ariadne refers to as her brother Asterios.

HB The thing that came up, which I like to think I was in some respects responsible for unravelling, is this question of the half and half, which is in a sense permanently there. But how do you divide it? Because, what you see, generally speaking, is the animal – with human characteristics, but it doesn't behave in a human way. So how do you get language into it?

DB Well, you do that in the dream scenes, 'The Minotaur dreams', when the Minotaur sings text and laments his unnatural situation, rather than the incomprehensible noises that he roars elsewhere.

HB In his dreams he 'speaks' as human and confronts this predicament very clearly about what his problem is. [For example, in the second Minotaur dream, he sings: 'conceived in pain, born in fear, looked-on with loathing, put out of sight'.]

DB Was that idea of the Minotaur 'speaking' there at the very beginning?

HB No, it was something that was one of the problems with the thing of why you don't 'do' the Minotaur, which interested me because it allowed him to express a different type of music, and to express all his problems.

DB And he has a shadow – a spoken rather than sung part – referred to in the libretto as Minotaur 2.

HB That came into it later because he has to talk to somebody, you see, you have to have him confront himself. I thought that was rather potent. You'll see, there'll be a huge version of him in a mirror.

DB So there will be a voice but we won't see the singer.

HB I don't know. Whatever works best for the piece. But he'll probably find something in the ground, which is a mirror, and look at it.

DB So there has to be that connection established.

HB He's looking at himself, he's saying 'that is who I am', and then we see it in a way.

DB Because the shadow is quite tough on the Minotaur. He's sort of saying, 'come on, get real'...

HB Yes, you're right, face up to the reality of what you are.

DB Parallels with *Gawain* spring to mind.

HB There are parallels, you're right. I mean, I felt there were parallels. I'm not quite sure what they are, but I sort of felt it.

DB There is the division between inner and outer worlds, which in *Gawain* was represented by the world of Arthur's court and the wilderness beyond, and here there is a contrast between the Minotaur's dream world and his conscious existence in the labyrinth, although this breaks down at the end when the Minotaur associates the sight of Theseus with his vision of him in a dream. Ariadne is a kind of female conspirator, controlling events in a similar way to Morgan le Fay in *Gawain*. There is also a series of hunts and kills in scene 5, the second labyrinth scene, which is reminiscent of the hunt scenes in *Gawain*, and there is the idea of a bond that Theseus must honour, putting his life on the line as Gawain is forced to do. I also thought the Minotaur collapsed elements of Gawain's character and that of the Green Knight into one.

HB Yes. In the end, he begins to speak as he dies.

DB Yes, I was amazed: you've written an operatic ending. A huge dying scene!

HB Well he has to die. I mean, that's what the piece is about, so you can't get away from that. But this transference from the animal that can't speak into speech is where it shows it's human, which means it should die. I mean we had this issue over when the Kera takes his [the Minotaur's] heart out – whether it's an animal heart or a human heart – but that seemed to be taking things... but we toyed with that idea.

DB The darker side of the opera is very evident in the four labyrinth scenes, which contrast with the slower-moving scenes where the Minotaur dreams. It strikes me that the dramatic pacing is very effective, although obviously it remains to be seen how well this will work on the stage. Did you originally envision a continuous, one-act piece?

HB Yes. I've done it so that you could do it as either one or two acts. I did the ending of the first act and then began the second act where the other ended, so you just chop a bit off and keep going. They sell drinks, you see... They want to make money.

DB Yes, never mind the art. Looking at the score and the size of the orchestra it's clearly a very substantial piece.

HB It's one hour, fifty minutes long.

DB When you were composing, how conscious were you of earlier operas, both your own and those of other composers?

HB That's something I never think about. I don't like thinking of devices. They do crop up but they're not solutions.

DB Do you remember how you felt about opera back in the 1960s when you composed *Punch and Judy*?

HB Well, I think that theatre is very much in my way of thinking from school and playing in musicals. I don't know. I had ideas about it, like making a set, as a kid, without any reference to what went on in it. All things like that. And, I don't know, it seemed to be a natural thing.

DB So would you say *Punch and Judy* is more about theatre than opera?

HB Oh, yes, it's more about theatre. I'm naturally attracted to a sort of formal theatre.

DB You have all those sections, over one hundred, and many with Baroque titles.

HB Well, they're not my titles. It's a sort of opera in inverted commas using every device. So then I use the word *toccata*, which comes from Monteverdi.

DB Which is an idea you use again in *The minotaur*. Are the three *toccatas* in *The minotaur* about mood-setting in a way that they weren't in *Punch and Judy*?

HB Their function is slightly different... I like the idea that they're a sort of contradiction to the way that we think of *toccata*, and it only becomes relevant because it's just a piece of romantic association with Monteverdi. In *Punch and Judy* they frame the Chorales, but in *The minotaur*... They're *ritornelli*; well, they're not *ritornelli*... It's like a car with the engine switched on but not going; it's music ticking over, you know, it's about stasis.

DB So, you thought, we need to take a break from the action.

HB Yes. Well, it's not a suspension of action, it's not like someone with a dagger over somebody's head and then after the curtain goes down..., it's not that. They're quite natural places. I think it's about time and breathing. It's pure intuition. I just wanted the music to sort of rest for a moment, and you can't do it with silence. It's like composed silence in the sense that you want to sort of let it rest a minute, and then it will take over. What happens in the set is a screen, a video screen, big video screen, and there'll be sea, very slow – with wings, just moving like a bird in flight but still, very sort of sinister, very dark.

DB Is that image going to be projected at the very beginning of the opera?

HB The sea will be at the beginning.

DB To what extent did you visualise this opera, *The minotaur*, while you were composing it, or is that secondary, does that come after the music?

HB You don't want to say to somebody designing it, 'this is what it looks like'. All you can do is give them the possibility of how it functions, and this sort of atmosphere, and then, if there's anything that comes up which is contrary to your ideas, to my ideas, then it's a matter of ... not compromise, it's what collaboration is, the definition of collaboration.

DB Does the act of writing an opera feel easier now? *The mask of Orpheus* was clearly a monumental task.

HB Well, you can't be self-indulgent if you're going to write it in three years. You could spend your life writing two hours of music. You just have to do it. Wagner must just have done it like hell, there's no messing. I think Wagner had a formula.

DB Do you have a shorthand?

HB No. Well, I do. I write a short-score, but not a piano reduction. It's a lot of layers, and things.

DB Bits and pieces, written in sequence?

HB Yes. I think that's what Stravinsky did.

DB But how do you keep a track of the bigger picture in terms of dramatic timing? Is that just instinctive?

HB It's just instinctive. I don't think about it. I certainly could never do anything ... well, it's not true actually. I can't remember where [in the opera] it is now, but it's the only time I've ever done it ... I was waiting for a text and then I got on and wrote the next bit. But generally speaking I have to react to the context that I've made. I can't do something out of context.

DB So the opera already has a life of its own in your mind? Text is coming in at later stages, but you're fitting that to your existing idea?

HB Well, David [Harsent] and I have quite an interesting relationship in that he provides something that is sort of finished, and then I start, and we start, working on it. When there's a musical context, then there's the necessity for that text to change, or there's too much, or this doesn't need to be there. We took a lot out actually. There was a whole scene, another sequence in the labyrinth when the Minotaur kills a boy, which we took out. Near the end there was a moment when Theseus reads a long history, and I said, well we can't do that near the end, I mean, I don't know how to do that. You can read it, but... He tells this long history ... so we got rid of that. And then a sort of rape of Ariadne, by Theseus.

DB That was in the original plan?

HB Yes. So we took that out.

DB You didn't attempt to...

HB No, I just thought it was unnecessary. I mean, once you've killed the Minotaur, once you've got to the end of this bull dying, you can't... it seems to me the flow is to that point, and it seemed to be absolutely right. I mean, who cares? What does it tell him? David didn't like that, but he agreed to get rid of it. If you've got this long death you can't suddenly lay off and come back to it, I mean, you're down the slippery slope to the end, and that's it.

DB So, was that end-point there in your original conception?

HB Well, no, not till I got there did I see it, but I could not look at a text without having written music and say 'well I don't want this' or 'I don't want that'. Anything I said was because of something I'd written musically.

DB Were the toccatas there at the start?

HB No, they weren't. They came in as I wanted, they became something that

I wanted. The thing with the death, also – you said this is an operatic thing – ... one of the reasons I wrote it was to write a piece for John Tomlinson. That was one of the contributing factors to why we did it. I just thought it would be good to write something for John. I heard him sing the end of *Boris* and I said maybe we could have a bit of that at the end.

DB Around the time of *Gawain* wasn't he singing Hagen?

HB He's recently started singing Hagen; he used to sing Wotan. I don't know why; is the tessitura a bit different? I based the tessitura of the Minotaur on Hagen. You know where the centre of gravity is, usually two-thirds of the way up, so it hangs around the top of the bass clef and then it doesn't go too much higher. I mean, if you take A at the top of the bass clef you can go up a fifth, but you can certainly go an octave below, or even lower; you can go down maybe to an F.

DB So, he'll be comfortable with that role.

HB Well, he said it's perfect. I can't get better than that, can I?

DB What about Ariadne, did you have someone in mind for that?

HB No, I didn't; I've not really heard Christine [Rice] sing. She had a part in *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk*, which I heard, but I couldn't really tell from that. But Pappano says she's perfect, and he's somebody I trust.

DB How do you see that role of Ariadne? Is it the light that contrasts with the darker parts?

HB Oh, no. She's a dark lady in a terrible predicament. She gets the sort of hots for Theseus.

DB Well, there's a triangle between Ariadne, the Minotaur and Theseus, who could well be blood relations. How conscious were you of that?

HB Yes, very; it's the essential drama. The journey of the Snake Priestess to the Oracle at Psychro [in scene 10] is just a contrivance, a conceit; it's like the Queen of the Night, it's a piece of mechanism. It just comes up out of the ground. [The stage directions read: 'A pit opens up centre stage. This is the Omphalos: the centre of the world. Wisps of gas issue from it. The Snake Priestess appears: the voice of the Oracle. She is bare-breasted and holds a snake in either hand.']

DB What is your attraction to lost and lonely male characters? I'm reminded in this opera of Kong [in Birtwistle's opera *The second Mrs Kong*]. I've mentioned parallels to Gawain – some of those will come out – but there's a lot of Kong in *The minotaur* as well...

HB Is there?

DB At one moment the Minotaur speaks of being trapped inside this pelt, and you've got that relationship again with death, 'Death of Kong', which of course Kong as an idea resists, whereas the Minotaur doesn't have that option...

HB No, he doesn't have that... There's a sort of loneliness, isn't there?

DB Is that something that you're drawn towards exploring?

HB Yes, I think so. It's my melancholy state of mind, I suppose.

[*laughter*]

HB I couldn't possibly write an opera with a direct psychology, with people in suits. I could not do that.

DB There's a psychological dimension in all of your operas, of course...

HB Oh, yes.

DB And that sense of shutting things away and of them coming up at moments, of us being uncomfortable with certain feelings, and the Minotaur represents that for everybody, in a sense. He's that secret shut away, the product of an 'unnatural' act. What about the labyrinth, because it's a very ancient symbol...

HB Well, one thing we battled with was why have a crowd in it? Are they workmen? Because the essential thing about the labyrinth is that it's a place that you can get into but that you can't get out of. So who are these people?

[*laughter*]

DB Because they're separate from the young men and women sent for sacrifice...

HB The Innocents?

DB Yes.

HB The Innocents get eaten and raped. The crowd are onlookers. They're fickle. They shout on behalf of the bull, they shout on behalf of Theseus, and when he kills the children they lament the deaths. They're sort of outside it, they're our sort of consciousness. They don't really exist, in a sense.

DB You've got a similar thing again in *Kong*, in the fight scenes, with people, as you say, who are fickle, and who may represent a form of collective psyche...

HB Yes, and I've made it so that the two crowds in *The minotaur* are independent. It's like anarchy; they're like a football crowd. They tend to settle down and reach the same point of view at the end. When they lament the death at the end, they're a single chorale.

[*interruption to pour tea*]

DB There is a series of contrasts in your new opera which will be familiar to many from your previous operas. About the labyrinth, for example, at one moment the text describes light coming into the courtyard, but in the next instant it's talking about dark alleyways and blood on the walls...

HB But that's all in their minds in a dream, in their dreams. They sing a sort of duet when they say 'I dreamt of the labyrinth' before they get in there. In a way they're setting it up.

DB In the second Minotaur dream scene I wondered whether we were in fact in Ariadne's dream, because she makes a comment there about the Minotaur appearing to her [in scene 9 Ariadne sings 'Why do I dream of you, Asterios?']

HB There is a funny thing in that, because it's within his dream that she gets the idea of going to the Oracle [in scene 9]. He [the Minotaur] says something about someone who went to the Oracle and she says 'the Oracle, got it', that's what she should do... But I don't think you have to answer things like that, I mean, I don't care about that.

DB But the idea of there being irreducible ambiguities is an attractive feature of your operas.

HB Yes, well, what is the labyrinth? I mean, we always think of labyrinths as being like mazes but, in fact, if you go to Epidavros [the labyrinth there] was a building. It was three-dimensional, it wasn't all on one level. You went up steps, it wasn't simply on the ground, you went upstairs onto different landings, and all sorts of terrible things. And in this one [in *The minotaur*] what they do is they go down. They go down into a hole in the ground, by steps down into the labyrinth and then you see them inside this terrible space.

DB Like a vortex?

HB Ladders.

DB There's also the question of which type of maze this is, I mean, whether it's unicursal, that is with one route in and one out, or multicursal, where you actually get the choice, do I go left or right? Perhaps it could be either?

HB Yes.

DB There's a rather different parallel that the Innocents suggested to me. The idea of people being sent in to die and, as you say, this rather fickle audience of onlookers who lament the deaths but are passive otherwise, suggested certain parallels to our contemporary situation. Iraq came to mind...

HB What, you mean they should have bombs strapped to them?

DB Well, not exactly...

HB That's the version by Peter Sellars.

DB Yes, but modern art can be an effective parable of contemporary situations...

HB That has occurred to me, but then is that sort of situation in Iraq unique to the situation of war? Probably not. But what must be their state of mind, these Innocents? They're just children who are sent every year to be sacrificed to this bull. It's just one of these things in mythology that you've just got to accept. She had sex with a bull from the sea... I don't know why. But it's a lot of fun.

DB Whenever we get descriptions of Pasiphae's attraction to the bull you introduce an alto saxophone, in a 'sleazy' style. And before that, you pair the

alto saxophone with Ariadne. Are those two things related?

HB I don't think they are separate. I didn't predict the coupling of Ariadne and the saxophone, it just happened. I just thought we needed a saxophone; the orchestra needs a voice that's distinct.

DB Well, you brought the cimbalom back again as well.

HB I like the cimbalom as an instrument of point. It works very well with the harp and percussion; it brings an element of pitch into things, which I like very much. I used it in the *Neruda madrigales*. It's very interesting with the marimba and harp. I haven't got a marimba in *The minotaur* because it takes too much room in the orchestra. I want the woodwind on the back line, because that's the way they sound best, otherwise you get the percussion on the back line going through the strings. It's much better to have the brass going this way, the percussion that way, and the wind on the back line. And that's what Pappano said too, so I hope I've not got too much percussion.

DB You have some percussion on the stage.

HB Just timpani, or some drums; they're part of the chorus, they drive the chorus.

DB How much do you think your experience working on projects like *The Oresteia* and *The Bacchae* has helped when you come to write an opera?

HB It's funny that, because to have a practical experienced knowledge of the theatre, which I have, I worked a lot on tons of it, I've actually learnt not to ... not to be practical. Because I think everything can be achieved in theatre. There's a person who was an assistant of Richard Jones and he was being wooed to do *The second Mrs Kong*, and at one point *The second Mrs Kong* had a submarine in it. Well, it didn't have a submarine in the end, it was taken out. But anyway, I said to him 'have you any problem with the submarine?' and he said 'all my operas have submarines'. And Peter Hall has said that to me, 'don't be practical, we can solve it.' In a sense, the *Ring* is impractical. How do you do it? And that's one of the interesting things about it. How do you tell this thing that begins under the water and ends up, ten hours later, going up into the ... it's an incredible idea, really, isn't it?

DB You think the impracticality of the *Ring* is one of the things that continues to generate new productions.

HB Yes, exactly that.

DB Do you think that your attitude towards opera has changed over time? Do you remember a time when you, perhaps, felt hostile towards Grand Opera?

HB I don't really know too much about it, to be honest. I'm very interested in Monteverdi, and aspects of Baroque music. I get fed up with the da capo, it irritates me no end, I don't get that. I like *Pelléas* and I like *Boris Godunov*, and I like the *Ring*, and I like *Tristan*.

DB There are two opposites there, in a way; continuity in *Pelléas* and the *Ring*, both through-composed operas, and the sectional approach of Monteverdi...

HB Yes, but there's a lot of formalism in Wagner, like the leitmotif, which is an amazing idea.

DB So there's still a formality of some kind that you can identify with?

HB Yes, but I think that the leitmotif is extraordinary in that it makes a logical continuity which would not be of that order apart from the narrative. The narrative is defining a sort of musical order of these leitmotifs. No one can hear it really in that sense of 'this is the sword', but it is a musical logic which is completely original.

DB There is a fluidity, a continuity to *The minotaur* which seems to be something quite new to your works, I mean you don't repeat much...

HB I don't repeat anything.

DB Well, not precisely, but the verse/refrain idea, although it's there in the libretto, is less obvious in the music.

HB Yes, in the massacre [scene 5, 'The labyrinth'] there are three episodes of death, but that's about it.

DB Is that just the way it worked out?

HB Yes. But there is repetition in one sense, that there are these things going into the labyrinth and the set game, and then the dream, and the game...

DB The situations. But then it's as if the music writes across those structural repetitions...

HB Yes and no, I hope.

DB There was a lot of sketching involved, I imagine. There's a lot of work that goes into writing these operas. I don't know how you do it.

HB Oh, my God, yes. Hard work. I work every day.

DB Is it a chore ever?

HB It's like batting in cricket. Boycott says, you only go for the next 50, or the next 20 runs, that's your aim, and then you bat for drinks, and then you bat for the next ten runs. You set pockets of time to achieve, and that's the only way of doing it, because if you see this huge amount of work you have in front of you, you would never do it.

DB And is that how far ahead you think, in terms of the drama?

HB I think so, yes.

DB And then respond to wherever you've got by that stage?

HB Yes. You talk about the thing being lyrical. I don't sort of see it. I mean, if it comes out as lyrical that's fine, but it's how the instruments and voices express themselves. There are natural qualities within certain instruments and it might come out as lyrical, but it's not lyricism I'm trying to achieve. I'm trying to achieve the quality of the voice, the expression of it. You can write notes for voices and it comes out as filthy. I hear a lot of vocal lines [by other composers] which to me seem terrible — you know, word-setting and that. I know some people have said I set words very badly, or something. I can't understand that. I don't understand it. It's something I hear all the time, the way the word is being expressed, where the stress is. Very often things begin on the beginning of the bar. If a word is repeated it has a melisma the first time and not the second time, or the other way around. I'm very careful about the intervals they sing; they're all within the range. So what else is there? What is it that's not good? I'd love to know. Maybe in something like *Punch and Judy* there's a very angular thing, but it's in the subject matter. I mean, it's 'tough guy'. That's only because it comes out of the language. But to say that I write against the voice... I hear a lot of modern music that sounds to me as if it's against the voice. But...

DB Well, if a composer started with a set of pitches and just fitted the vocal line to those predetermined pitches... but do you do that? I don't see much evidence of it.

HB There are certain intervals associated with certain characters, that's one thing. But that's purely private and it's another thing not to think about, I mean, I know that that belongs to that, and that belongs to that, and certain things will emanate from it and hopefully it will give the music a certain character, but no more than that. It responds to the dramatic moment. I don't know what else you can do. It's not particularly wide leaps. So what is it? I'd love to know.

DB Perhaps at times when there's fast moving music with a different syllable on every note you're moving through the text quite quickly and it's hard to pick up the words there...

HB You mean like Rossini?

[laughter]

DB Perhaps the overall concept of an opera or particular moments require you to use different types of text-setting?

HB Well, sometimes you have to forget what the words mean for what the music means. You make the music express the word, and the word the music, but in the end it's a musical expression. But that happens in all opera.

DB Well, the idea of singing in opera is a little artificial.

HB I always think it's amazing in *Die Meistersinger* where they're all singing and he says, 'I'm going to sing you a song'. It's a ridiculous idea, isn't it? 'Hi, I'm going to sing you a song'.

DB But it's interesting what you say about composing for the quality of the instruments and the voices.

HB Yes, well I really hear them singing. I hear the music in the tempo, the way it's expressed. If I come to a text and I look at it, or listen to it, or decide how it's going to be, the first thing I do is decide what the tempo is, as I'm hearing it, and clock it down. And then you have something to move from, quicker or slower, so it's always the text that's being expressed.

DB You have a pulse in your mind?

HB Yes, like a pulse.

DB Do you feel with *The minotaur* that you've reached a point that you want

to go beyond?

HB Well, did you see my piece the *Io Passion*? The thing about Grand Opera is that you can't deal in detail, or in fact, detail is of a different order to something that is more intimate and small. The *Io Passion* is about somebody having a cup of tea, and you can't, at the Royal Opera, write an opera about somebody having a cup of tea, you can't have close-up. And I have another scheme for a piece that I'm going to do next year, but it's going to be very intimate, with very few instruments, getting fewer and fewer.

DB The *Io Passion* has a very small ensemble...

HB Five. Clarinet and string quartet.

DB The writing is very spare and there's a long instrumental introduction. What was in your mind with that introduction?

HB Well, you have to know that I had a concept about the set; I made the set.

DB The inside and the outside of a house.

HB Yes, because I was fascinated with how you put a letter in a letterbox from the outside and it comes in the next room at the same time, you know about what the outside and the inside is. It's that sort of detail which is fascinating, so my intention is to write a similar piece, but even more spare. I'm not sure what. Well, I do know what...

DB Go on, tell me.

HB Well, I want to do it with instruments, so that the instruments are on the set but they're like Shades, with one person, and they react to her, and she speaks to these Shades and they only answer in music. And it's about Eurydice going back after she's turned ... the moment you see the turn.

DB The moment she's lost the second time...

HB Yes, and I imagine it will be an extended *Erwartung*-type piece, half-an-hour or so, in which she makes this very slow journey forward while he's following her. But you don't see him, you only hear him offstage. And then she has to go back along a line of musicians, a corridor... She makes like a U: she will pass them and then, as she gets here, she'll pass them again. He, the tenor, will only be accompanied by a harp, offstage.

DB How will you go about finding or choosing a librettist?

HB I feel it's a text for a woman. I don't know why I feel that, but we'll see. I don't know. I'm going into that now.

DB So for you music theatre is an opportunity to put a subject under a microscope?

HB And really examine it, yes.

David Beard is Lecturer in Music at Cardiff University. He is co-author (with Kenneth Gloag) of Musicology: the key concepts (Routledge, 2005) and is currently writing a monograph, Birtwistle's operas and music theatre, for Cambridge University Press.